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ABSTRACT

This publication presents essays written by seven young, urban, minority students participating in an intensive writing workshop given by What Kids Can Do in collaboration with the Margins to Mainstream project. The goal of the workshop was to coach students to create short essays suitable for use as a newspaper column, radio commentary, or college essay. The essays, which speak of the youths' struggles, inspirations, challenges, and triumphs include: "My Sequel to 'Baby Boy'" (Kellon Innocent); "Naki and I Start School" (Maharai Lowe); "How a Family Turns" (Misty Wilson); "What Really Matters? A Student's Perspective on Schooling" (Christine Mendoza); "Doing the Math for the American Dream" (Nick Jackson); "Fire, Water, Family: Moving Past Fear into the Future" (Cleopatra Counts); and "The Will To Work and Where We Find It" (Bosung Kim). The final paper, "Afterword" (Kathleen Kushman), describes the process of writing these essays during the writing workshop, explaining that for most of the participants, the process demystified the act of writing for publication and allowed students to see that their own lives could yield important points for others. (SM)

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HEAR US OUT:
Commentary by Youth on School and Society

Speaking Out

A joint project of
What Kids Can Do
Providence, Rhode Island
and
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Boston, Massachusetts
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HEAR US OUT:
Commentary by Youth on School and Society

In this series of personal commentaries, young people from urban environments speak of their struggles and inspirations, their challenges and triumphs.

In a period of intense debate about how best to prepare young people for adulthood, the voices of the young people themselves are conspicuously absent. Major public institutions and policies designed to serve 16–24 year olds fail to recognize the dramatic changes they face, both in the experience of coming of age in America and in the society young people will enter as adults.

Although young people have knowledge, understanding, and expertise to offer, they rarely have access to the powerful channels that shape public perceptions. And without such access, they remain vulnerable to the judgments of people who may determine their future chances without ever knowing their strengths or difficulties, their concerns or passions.

In every community, some responsive learning environments have proved the exception to this rule. Here young people are active and engaged participants, learning and working alongside adults who act as their teachers, guides, coaches, and mentors. Here adults listen hard to what youth have to say, and then inspire, support, and push them to develop their potential.

From the Margins to the Mainstream (a national initiative of Jobs for the Future) is exploring how effective learning environments garner the allegiance of young people, give them hope, and accelerate their advancement. As part of its inquiry, it also asks young people themselves what combination of supports and opportunities they need for a successful transition to adulthood. What helps and what hinders them? What does the public need to know about the obstacles youth face, the aspirations they harbor, the ideas they have?

This collection presents a few eloquent answers to those questions, developed in a series of intensive writing workshops given by What Kids Can Do in collaboration with the Margins to Mainstream project. Seven students representing five different programs participating in the initiative met with workshop leader Kathleen Cushman, an experienced writing coach and widely published journalist, to create a short essay suitable for use as a newspaper column, radio commentary, or college essay. They underwent the same close editorial consultations that a professional writer takes for granted, but their words are all their own.

We hear, for example, from Kellon Innocent how his newfound identity as a videographer gives him perspective on his life and how his small alternative school

helped him to find that identity through its internship program. Misty Wilson's story reminds us that a school's intervention can help not just the student but the whole family. Maharai Lowe gives us a glimpse of how her desire to be a role model for her daughter is motivating her to turn her life around.

These and the other richly human stories in this collection compel us to view with respect and dignity the young people around us every day in classrooms, workplaces, and neighborhoods. Each individual comes across as a complex person with a life full of competing pressures and priorities, struggling to meet the future. We hope these powerful pieces will be circulated widely, bringing national attention to what youth have to say about their educational experiences, their challenges, and their hopes and dreams.

Funding for the youth voice workshops was provided by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. From the Margins to Mainstream is also funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, and the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation. Also partnering in our work is the Northeast Educational Laboratory at Brown University. We are grateful for their generous support.

My Sequel to 'Baby Boy'

by Kellon Innocent

John Singleton's latest movie "Baby Boy" tells the story of a 20-year-old African-American man living at home with his mother. He has fathered two babies by two girlfriends, but he is not yet ready to take full responsibility for his life. And because I am the same age and race as Singleton's main character and I live in a similar neighborhood, this film made me think about the urban dramas that I could tell some day, when I am a film director myself.

I like Singleton's filmmaking techniques, and I like his messages, too. But I started to think about the narrative choices that I would make if I ever had the chance to pitch my own ideas to a producer.

I could tell the story of a 16-year-old young woman I know, who has a baby girl and lives with her aunt. Having the baby makes it hard for her to get to school, because she depends on her mother and her boyfriend's mother for day care, and they both work. Now she wants to finish high school, but she needs a school with day care.

Do I want my narrative to have her stay with her boyfriend and get married? Maybe I do, if that meant that he would stay off the streets and be a good role model for his daughter. Right now he's working, but he's a high school dropout so it won't be easy to make enough to support a family. The young mother could get a job, too, but probably that would make it hard for her to stay in school.

I don't really like the thought of my character and her baby not having a stable family with a husband and father. But if my movie is trying to show that stability equals responsibility, would it be the best thing to have her get married right now? I don't know.

What would be another way to play it? First, I could have my character not be so young when she has her baby. For that, someone at the big junior high school she went to would have to recognize that she was heading in the wrong direction and steer her toward the right track. When she went on to high school, I would have her go to a place where they would notice her artistic talent and keep her interested enough to stay connected to positive influences. If the movie did let her get pregnant, her school would have a day care center in it, and an adviser who knew her well enough to help her through the struggle. Her boyfriend would stay in school, go on to higher education, and get a good job.

I know these things are possible because my own experience has been almost the total opposite of hers. I started out at the same junior high school, but I ended up at City As School, a small alternative high school that helps students find interesting

"What would be another way to play it? I started to think about the narrative choices I would make if I ever had the chance to pitch my own ideas to a producer."

internships around the city. I interned at the Educational Video Center, where in a small hands-on workshop our mentors taught us to produce documentary videos. I now work as the equipment technician there, and when I'm ready to make my own movie I have the skills to do it.

I could have gone the other way, ending up like Baby Boy. But I relate more to his creator, John Singleton. I want to tell stories the way they are and at the same time educate people on how to avoid ending up in the same unstable situations that my characters are experiencing.

Kellon Innocent, 21, works as a technician at the Educational Video Center, where he learned videography skills as a high school student at one of New York City's alternative public schools. He is from St. Lucia and lives in the Bronx.

"Now it's time for her to get on go, take her dreams, care about herself, and go wherever she wants."

Naki and I Start School

by Maharai Lowe

I'm starting school again this month, in a culinary arts program that I hope will get me a good job and end my need for public assistance this year. And I'm taking my little girl, Naki, to her first school this month. As I walk her through the door of the day care program, I think of all my hopes and fears for her.

Naki is three years old, with big brown eyes and dark hair just long enough for a lot of little ponytails with hair ties. She's long so I think she's going to be tall, and she has a pop belly and dime thighs, with little fat feet and stubby hands like her dad. She loves to sing in her squeaky but rough voice. She's a lovely child.

I've been in the YouthBuild program for the past two years, learning construction and working toward my high school equivalency diploma, while Naki stayed first with my grandmother and later with my mother. Now it's time for her to go to school with other kids, so she can get on go, take her dreams, care about herself, and go wherever she wants.

I was raised by my grandmother, and she would take me to church with her every Sunday. But she kept me too close to her in the house, and maybe that's the reason I got wild and dropped out of high school when I was 14. Even though I don't like my daughter to be away from me too much, I want Naki to be better than I was—to skip

the streets, keep her mind focused, and stay in school. So although I want her at my side always, I know I've got to let her go.

But I fear her going to school. I fear her fear, and feel it. What if the teachers don't treat her right, or kids hit on her, or she hits on other kids? I fear her walking the playground and no one minding her. Naki hates boys, she can be selfish like me, and like her father she thinks the world revolves around her. She loves to go in the sprinklers or go swimming, she hates snow, and she likes to get dirty. Every time she's bad I pretend to pop her and she says, "No Mommy, I'll be a good girl," and goes right on to what she's doing.

That's my Naki, the child of my life. I want her to explore the world sea to sea and come back with a story for me. I dream she stays in school, decides to go to college, furthers her education. I would like her to be famous someday—singing, dancing, acting, or even being our president.

But first, I've got to walk her through the door. I show her the door that I'm going to walk through, because whatever I show my daughter I can do, she's going to do it. Then I take her to her own school, and I have to leave her there. As I go back to school I imagine her standing there so proudly with her back straight up, nose up, and feet straight, heading her successful way.

Maharai Lowe, 21, attends the YouthBuild program in Springfield, Massachusetts and is completing her GED. She is a single mom; the father of her daughter, Naki, was recently released from prison in New York.

"I dream she stays in school, decides to go to college, furthers her education."

How a Family Turns

by Misty Wilson

Just a year ago, my family was working toward stability, at a moment of precarious hope. I was starting my first year at Brown University. My brother and sister were both enrolled at the high school that changed my life. And my mother had finally made the decision to enter a residential drug rehabilitation center. It was a new beginning for all of us.

For much of my childhood my mother struggled with using drugs; this was her remedy to the pain of raising three children as a single parent in poverty. Although I always knew my mother loved us, at times I almost gave up on my family and accepted the idea that I would have to depend on myself. "Follow your dreams," my mother always told me. "I never want you to be like me."

"Although I always knew my mother loved us, at times I almost gave up on my family and accepted the idea that I would have to depend on myself."

At the age of 17, my mother had given birth to me and dropped out of high school. Her blooming years of exploration and growth were abruptly stunted, replaced with the burden of raising first one child and soon two more. She depended heavily for guidance and support on my grandmother, who helped her be a good mother and eased the harsh realities of her life.

However, a little over three years ago, my grandmother passed away. Her passing was hard on all of us, but it came down heaviest on my mother, who felt alone in the world. I remember often watching her cry. The stresses of raising three teens as she struggled to find work and pay the bills were harsher than ever.

Without my grandmother there, my mother began to escape regularly to the drugs she had sporadically used before to numb her pain. But her escape was a scary trap that hurt us all. She began to stop her normal cooking and cleaning and interacting with us. Vicious fights would break out between all of us daily, and we began behaving disrespectfully toward her and each other. Later she would leave home for days at a time, and as the oldest I found myself taking the responsible role in the family. My 16-year-old sister, very bitter towards my mother, became depressed and isolated. My brother, 15, would skip school and roam the streets, hanging out with older people. I was constantly worried and angry, but I was scared that if I asked for help the system would break up our family.

Soon holding back the stress became impossible, and I spoke to the advisor who had guided my education ever since I started at the "Met," a small high school in Providence, RI that focuses on individual education and real world opportunities. That led to a counseling session with my advisor and our whole family, facilitated by the school's guidance counselor. But that was only a first step. Even though we

all left the meeting with a better understanding and a little more hope, the problem still persisted.

I graduated from high school and went away for a summer job. While I was gone, our house caught fire and my brother and sister had to move in with relatives. Soon after I returned, my mother disappeared, leaving us a despairing note with a friend. I moved into college without her.

But during that first week, as I began my new life as a Brown student, my mother decided to begin a new life, too. I got a call from her, saying that she wanted to meet with me and my siblings, along with some members of our church. She was going to do something about her problem.

The school year now unfolding brings a moment of victory and pride as I begin my second year of college and I watch my mother celebrate her first anniversary of sobriety. Both my sister and my brother are thriving at the Met, getting the same kind of education that got me to this point. For the first time I can remember, my whole family is moving in a positive direction.

Was it my grandmother's spirit that changed my mother's course? Was it the support of my advisors at the Met? Was it our church community and the amazing family that took my siblings in? Was it some strength deep inside each of us? Somehow I know that it was all of these things together.

I have learned that changing a family—just like changing the world—takes people who truly care and want change, working together, to make a difference. My family was among the fortunate ones who had that. Now I can go on and do the same for someone else.

Misty Wilson, 19, is a sophomore at Brown University and co-founder of Youth in Action, a nonprofit community action group in Providence. She attended the Met school in Providence, a small, innovative public high school where each student follows an individualized program.

"Changing a family—just like changing the world—takes people who truly care and want change, working together, to make a difference."

What Really Matters? A Student's Perspective on Schooling

by Christine Mendoza

Growing up in Brooklyn I went to four schools between seventh grade and high school graduation, and they couldn't have been more different. I had the chance to experience first hand different ways to organize schools and classrooms, and to try out for myself a lot of the current theories about what works best for kids. And I came to some surprising conclusions.

"I had the chance to experience first hand different ways to organize schools, and to try out for myself the current theories about what works best for kids."

My seventh grade experience sounds like a dream come true: I had a private tutor six hours a day, and the company of two dozen other kids like myself. My elementary school chorus teacher, Mr. Zwirn, had taken our group to audition for a Broadway musical, and along with several others I got a child's part. A bus took us every day to the Minskoff Theater in Times Square, where 25 tutors were assigned to keep each one of us up on our schoolwork. Then came the tedious hours of rehearsal every afternoon and evening, getting us ready for the next year when we would join the show.

But my tutor didn't know anything about where I was academically, and I couldn't explain it to her. I brought my textbooks from the junior high where I would have been going, and mostly I did exercises from them in spelling, math, and science. We didn't have a science lab and we didn't take any field trips. We didn't read anything but the textbooks; sometimes the tutor would read them aloud to me. I only got to be with the other students during the lunch period.

The next year, I was back in junior high with my friends, though I spent a lot of my out-of-school time in performances. That was a good year, because our chorus teacher had transferred there and our group had become so well known that we got to sing at big events like Yankees, Mets, and Knicks games. The school gave eighth graders a lot of freedom, even letting us go off campus for lunch if we wanted. It was a big school, but all the staff knew the members of the chorus.

I auditioned for a small public performing arts high school in Manhattan, and started ninth grade there thinking it would be just as good. But there, the teachers hardly cared about our learning in regular academic classes. When I would raise my hand in math class to ask a question, the teacher would tell me I was holding other students back. Soon I grew embarrassed to ask, and I fell further behind. By the next year I was in a pattern of academic failure, and so they barred me from my

musical theater class. Discouraged and unmotivated, I dropped out of school without telling my mother where I was spending my days.

A year later I found myself with a second chance, enrolled at a small alternative public high school that places students in workplaces around the city for high school credit. I took classes at times that fit into my internship schedule, and we had seminars every week where we would speak with our advisors about issues that concerned us. My advisor, Carlos, who was also our softball coach, was a middle-aged black social studies teacher and former social worker. Carlos cared about what we did and where our lives were headed, and his genuine concern and advice really made a difference.

Like the chorus in my junior high school, that softball team mattered more than almost anything else I ever did in school. There were 15 of us, four girls and 11 boys, and we were like a big family. Carlos had motivating words for us before we played, and he always encouraged us to keep our heads up, even when we were losing. We practiced every day, and we won nine out of the ten games we played. Our coach believed in us, and he was there for us when we needed an adult. And that kept us motivated to work hard and come to school.

While in that school, I began an internship in videography that eventually turned into a job after graduation. But I still keep in touch with Carlos, and I am hoping to visit his seminar this fall and show one of my videos to his students.

You might think that having a private tutor would be the ideal way to learn and succeed in school. But my experience shows that it's not so much the role that matters between a teacher and a student. Whether it's in a math class or a chorus or a softball team, it's the relationship with an adult who cares that really keeps us learning.

Christine Mendoza, 19, works at the Educational Video Center, where she interned as a high school student while attending City As School. She lives in Brooklyn.

"It's not so much the role that matters between a teacher and a student. It's the relationship with an adult that really keeps us learning."

"People who are living day to day don't have the advantage of seeing their property start to pay for itself."

Doing the Math for the American Dream

by Nick Jackson

For me, the American dream is the picture of a white house with a picket fence, a wife and two kids and a dog. Even though I am just 18 years old, I already know that I could have that dream; all I need is several thousand dollars for a deposit on a house in a rundown neighborhood, and six months of pay stubs to show that I can pay the mortgage.

I know I can reach my dream because I have learned to do the math, working during my last two years of high school as an intern at a real estate company. I have already taken business courses at a nearby college, and I plan to take the real estate licensing exam as soon as I receive my high school diploma. I can already see myself helping others like myself get to the level of prosperity they dream of.

Even if you're not well off financially, you can get a start by getting someone to co-sign your mortgage. Or you can take advantage of low interest rates, or use federal programs that allow low-income people to start a mortgage with no money down.

Once I paid the deposit on a three-decker house, for example, I could rent out all three floors to cover the mortgage and maintenance expenses. After a 15-year mortgage, the house would be paid for and I could use the rent money to make a deposit on another house. I imagine some day owning several multi-family units, at the same time making a living helping people like me buy their own homes.

I believe I can achieve my dream, because I have teachers and mentors who are behind me, helping me get the experience I need to do it. But I also know other young men around my age, whose idea of the American dream will never be fulfilled. My cousin Bobby was on his way to his idea of success this past summer, on the streets of Queens. He had bought his mother a car and a condo, and he was looking forward to leaving his past behind him and beginning a new life with enough money to make a clean start. They found Bobby at one in the morning, shot dead in a pool of blood. The handgun his friends had given him before they ran away hadn't worked.

Here in Providence, my classmate Joe was on his way to his dream, too. He was a model student, a small young man with a big heart who did not have problems with anyone. At midnight a few weeks ago, Joe and his friends were walking home through their neighborhood when a gold SUV sped up from the rear and shots rang out. Joe had no reason to fear anyone, so as his friends ran or ducked, he stood with his head high and died.

Is it just luck that helps you reach your American dream? Was Joe just in the wrong place at the wrong time? Was Bobby too loyal to friends who led him in the wrong direction? As I make my own plans for the future, I try to use my understanding of the way the world works. People do get shot because they get mistaken for someone else. People who are living day to day don't have the advantage of seeing their property start to pay for itself. When I think of these two tragic deaths, I want to do everything I can to keep my goals realistic and in sight. In this land of opportunity, I will not let my surroundings change my American dream.

Nick Jackson, 18, is a senior at the Met school in Providence, Rhode Island, and has worked for two years as an intern for a ReMax real estate office.

Fire, Water, Family: Moving Past Fear into the Future

by Cleopatra Counts

It was hot that night on Gordon Avenue in Providence, so hot that it made people take cold showers. I was about 12 years old, and the streetlights had been on for hours. I stood around with my friends enjoying the summer night, people watching out for us from the windows of our two-story wooden houses.

Nobody expected the black cloud that came all at once from the factory across the street and swept through the neighborhood like butter on toast. As flames erupted from the building, all down the street shadowy figures began to run from their houses through the smoky haze, like it was raining gold coins instead of fire. As the heat from the flames got worse, the fire trucks had to push their way down the street through the crowd that stood and watched. People scattered frantically, screaming and falling on each other. From where we took shelter inside my house, we could see that the wind was blowing the sparks to the roofs of nearby buildings that were catching fire, too. We knew our house was probably next, but for a long while we stayed inside where the firefighters had told us, until we got so scared that we had to leave.

Looking back, I can see moments of intense fear all through my life so far. Some of them, like that fire in our neighborhood, came from actual physical danger. I remember falling overboard into Zone 5 whitewater on a Maine rafting trip I took with the Crusaders, a youth group I was in when I was 13. Until I was finally rescued I spent at least half an hour being thrown by the freezing cold water into

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"I try to keep the light inside me alive by surrounding it with the things it needs. At school we write in our journals three times a week, whatever we are thinking about or feeling."

whirlpools and against rocks. I tried to hold on to my friend's hand before she was swept away, tried to time my breathing so I wouldn't drown with water in my lungs, tried to catch the lines they were desperately throwing me from the raft. On the way home from that trip, our big yellow school bus swerved to avoid a truck that had hydroplaned on the rainy highway and we ended up in a collision. I remember thinking Please, just let me get home.

Some of my fears come from inside my family, not from outside. I have never really known my father, who is Portuguese and Cape Verdean. Because my race was not the same as his, he rejected me and my mother when I was born. My mother and her other children are all African-American and Native American, and my brothers and sister used to hit me and verbally attack me, calling me "white girl" and "mutt." I remember being locked in my mother's dreary bedroom, lying on the arctic floor and crying, my brother's spit on my face. I remember my mother kicking me out of the house, and staying with friends and relatives until I finally moved back in. I remember having nightmares about getting cancer, after my grandfather died from it, my grandmother got breast cancer, and then a dangerous tumor appeared on my mother's arm. I dreamed of going bald from chemotherapy, of my flesh decaying on my bones.

How do I move past my fear and live from day to day? I do it by finding a light inside me, an inner peace and faith where I can always take refuge, where nothing can enter unless I let it. I remember that everyone has that light inside them, and so I don't choose to throw back at other people the things they say to me. Instead, I think of positive things about myself. And I try to keep the light alive by surrounding it with the things it needs.

When I am upset, I use writing or crying as my outlet. At school we write in our journals three times a week, whatever we are thinking about or feeling. Our advisor writes back to us, letting us know that someone cares. I listen to the slow songs of Mariah Carey, because she is multi-racial, I can relate to her and feel like I'm not alone. I make a plan every day of what I need to do, and then I do it. All these things have helped me learn to walk right through my fears like they're not even there. A lot has happened to me, but I try not to dwell in my problems and fears. I know something better is out there for me, and I am ready to take it as it comes.

Cleopatra Counts, 17, is a senior at the Met school in Providence, Rhode Island.

The Will to Work and Where We Find It

by Bosung Kim

Last year, as I took my final exam in tenth-grade English, I sat near a classmate who I knew had made it through the year by cheating. I was surprised to see that he was nervous, because usually he seems nonchalant and laid back, as if he doesn't care. In that hot room, he told me later, he suddenly felt helpless as he looked at the pages in front of him. He realized he was going to have trouble, not only in the classroom but also in life. I could see that, contrary to my earlier belief, he cared.

Some students who care about success are easy to spot. Raised in a Korean-American family, for example, I was always pushed to do my best. My parents made sure I did all my homework. If I played a sport, I had to work hard at it. Even when I played the piano, they made me practice hard and smooth out all my errors. We did not have cable TV, and my brother and I were not allowed to watch movies until the weekend. The pressure on me was enormous, but working hard to succeed became a habit. By the time I got to high school, I was free to do more social things, because none of us worried that I would get behind in school.

Some people, like me, care about success because of their family upbringing. Others start to care because of their mentors or teachers, or because of supportive friends. But some, like my classmate who cheated, may not give out signals of distress in time. How can we be sure that we catch the little signs that they really do care?

I taught last summer at an intensive program for rising seventh and eighth graders, called Summerbridge. Its philosophy was "students teaching students"; high school and college students taught English, math, and elective courses to groups of younger kids. The middle school students who enrolled, at no cost, had to agree to stay for two full years, including after-school and Saturday tutoring during the school year, as well as summer sessions. Despite that, every year more kids apply than Summerbridge has room for.

I had a wonderful group for my math class. But one student, whom I'll call Josh, just got by in class. He didn't do well on his homework and he didn't seem to care. As I stood in front of my class of 13, I would see Josh staring off into space or drawing pictures in his notebook. I started working with him one to one in the afternoons. By the end of the summer, he was understanding more and more. Willingness to work was becoming second nature to him.

Another student, Sarah, had the willingness to work hard, but for the first two weeks I didn't realize that math concepts did not come easily to her at all. She had

"Some students who care about success are easy to spot. Others have to be found."

"To turn a person's habits around it takes someone to see that he or she really does want to succeed."

been handing in perfect homework, but on the first test she did poorly. When I took her aside she told me that she didn't understand most of the material, and that her father was helping her on her homework. At my encouragement, quiet Sarah began for the first time to come to a teacher with her math problems. Eventually, she began to work better by herself, and on the final exam she got a great score.

I believe that anybody feels hurt if no one is there for them, whether the support comes from family, teachers, mentors, or friends. To turn a person's habits around—the habit of cheating, for example, or of hiding what you don't know—it takes someone to see that the person is hurting, that he or she really does want to succeed. I was lucky that my family encouraged me early on in the habits of success. And I was even luckier that I got to pass that gift along to people whom others might once have seen as failures.

Bo Kim, 16, is a senior at Classical High School in Providence, Rhode Island. He spent the summer of 2001 as an intern at Providence Summerbridge.

Afterword

by Kathleen Cushman

The young authors represented in this collection developed these essays in an intensive two- to three-day process that in some ways resembles a writing workshop, in others an editorial conference, and in still others a very personal conversation.

As in a workshop, our group met in comfortable surroundings, with plenty of food and light. The schedule allowed ample time for us to grow comfortable as a group, learning to know and trust one another. I acted as facilitator as we talked together about their purpose in coming together: to plumb their own experiences for the images and ideas that readers would respond to, then to bring those experiences to life in writing.

To move the conversation along, I asked the group to think about the American dream—their own vision or that of others, whether they believed in it or not. That commonplace term gave rise to many images, as students talked about the instances that rewarded individualism and striving, the people who got lucky or noticed, the families left behind no matter how hard they worked. "What was that like?" a group member would ask. "Say more about that!" Inspired by such prompting, students' accounts became even richer with detail, as they told additional stories to support their points. All the while, I wrote furiously to record their words in my notebook.

When the discussion had run its course, I switched roles to that of the editor at a meeting, ready to winnow out the best ideas and get them onto paper. From my notes I reviewed with the group each student's most powerful images and asked them to commit these images to paper. In some cases, I already could envision how the images eventually might come together in an essay; in others, the connections remained murky but intriguing. The important thing was for all the images to move from the spoken word to the page, and so the students scattered to their separate nooks and began to write.

That writing took place during long stretches of time, with plenty of snacks to keep the words coming. I circulated quietly, reading what students had written and asking questions to get them going again when they were stuck. These conversations were private and often quite personal, as the young writers shared more details about their lives and feelings. New information emerged as they wrote and then conferred with me again.

On the second day, the skeletons of essays began to form from the sheaves of pages the young people had written. One by one, students read me their drafts aloud, and

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I marked with a highlighting pen the phrases I thought worked best—generally, those that conveyed concrete or sensory detail. *This* image, and this one, and this. By connecting these small moments of young people's experience, bigger ideas emerged. The points made themselves.

The next step was straightforward craft: what sentence should come first, which words the reader didn't need, when to stop and start paragraphs, what sounded most natural to the writer's voice. Each student again read aloud to me, over and over, until we both agreed it was right. This part took a long time, until we could see and hear and feel that something had come to its point, and the essay lived.

The next step was to give each commentary a title and byline, print it out, and read it to the group. Students practiced reading their pieces aloud, then recorded them on tape for possible broadcast. At the end, the whole group sat exhausted around the table, everyone feeling amazed at what they had done. All that was left was to laugh, hug, congratulate, and say goodbye, with promises to keep in touch via email.

For most of these young people, this process demystified the act of writing for publication. They saw that their own lives could yield important points for others; they went through the same steps that good writers use to discover what they have to say. Accorded the respect and dignity of an author, they gained heart and strength for the elusive process of wrenching words from experience, finding ideas through images. In the end, when their essays reached publishable form, they knew the triumph of speaking their own minds to influence a greater world.

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